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Inoperative Design: ‘Not Doing’ and the experience of the Community Architects Network

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Abstract:

This paper presents a renewed critical reflection of the position and role of architecture in the current social turn of the practice. By thinking through a ‘resistant’ lens, taken from Giorgio Agamben’s spatial political aesthetics, this paper proposes that architectural design practice can reclaim its social agency. These reflections are grounded in the practice of community architecture as it has recently emerged out of the intensifying experience of informality and associated slum settlements in the rapidly growing cities of South-East Asia. Born out of the decade-long experience of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), the Community Architects Network (CAN) was founded in 2010 and now connects practitioners in 19 countries. Based on a five-year long engagement between the authors and CAN, the paper reflects on the critical possibilities of CAN’s practice, discussing propositions, ambitions, challenges, and opportunities, and the political potential of architecture. Additionally, it presents its limitations, questioning to what extent such practices can be considered a kind of ‘negligence’, that is, a resistance against the status quo as a way of effectively strengthening new subjectivities and voices.

Keywords: Agamben, Community Architects Network, ‘inoperative practice’, architecture, social turn, Asian Coalition for Housing Rights

Introduction

The Community Architects Network (CAN) is a programme established in 2010 and funded by the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) and now operating in 19 countries, networking with governmental and non-governmental organisations, architectural and engineering practices, grassroots organisations and local universities. CAN’s activities have assisted a multitude of urban poor communities across South East Asia and the West-Pacific, thriving on funds coming from the Asian Coalition for Community Action programme (ACCA). ACHR’s novel approach lies in its ‘demand driven’ urban development methodologies, challenging the societal misrepresentation of the urban poor as helpless and untrustworthy. ACHR reframes the question of poverty alleviation developing interventions that ‘can nurture and develop the strength that already exists, letting people make change’ (Boonyabancha et al., 2012, 444). ACCA channels funds directly to urban poor communities without any mediation, in the form of small loans for housing and infrastructures and for the inception of economic activities: communities can apply for loans only on a collective basis, proving that they are organised in saving groups.¹ Despite the ambivalent judgment on the effectiveness of savings as true means of empowerment (Mitlin, 2011; Young, 2010), for ACHR saving groups and collective loans represent means to mobilise communal resources and people’s energies around needs and aspirations, and toward the upgrading of a settlement’s infrastructures and housing, or the improvement of income generating activities at different scales.

The present contribution focuses on the *praxis* of the Community Architects Network (CAN) and its imagination, design and construction process. We aim to reflect on CAN’s practice offering a specific regional and ethical contribution to the debate around the social significance of design. CAN, as a grassroots movement, in spite of some limitations that we

will discuss in the concluding part of the paper, aims to put the poor at the centre of the urban transformation process and to address the concerns and needs of unheard voices and marginalised groups.

We question whether the action of CAN works toward emancipating communities from the confines of the modern-day metropolis and its capitalist-driven production of space (Boano and Kelling, 2013; Boano and Talocci, 2014). In so doing, we ground the analysis of CAN's activities in Giorgio Agamben's theoretical apparatus, using three lesser-known concepts (*quodlibet*, *potentiality*, *inoperativity*). We argue that CAN's practice could actually produce an ethical shift (a *profanation*, using Agamben's terminology) in the production of urban space and knowledge. This shift is analysed at two different levels (the community and the city-wide network of communities) focusing on evidence from two action-research workshops and, more broadly, on a five-year long engagement between the authors and CAN.²

The social relevance of CAN's activities

Investigating CAN's socially-driven architectural approaches exemplifies an attempt to navigate the current tensions in the architecture-emancipation discourse away from the market driven and aesthetic logic of the current mode of architectural practice. The literature has highlighted a renewed emphasis on design activism (DiSalvo, 2010; Fuad-Luke, 2009); an expansion of the role of the architect (Aquilino, 2011; Awan, Schneider and Till, 2011); a renewed interest in the agency of architecture's users (Cupers, 2013; Schneider, 2013); a creative discussion of the act of commoning and the relevance of the commons (Bradley, 2015; Brillembourg & Klumpner, 2013), and the resurgence of do-it-yourself (DIY) tactics in which groups of citizens and architects/designers/activists appropriate and transform spaces in the city (Douglas, 2015; Grubbauer, 2015; Iveson, 2013). Such varieties of social practices do 'tend to organise the city differently [...] developing innovative, alternative or entrepreneurial ways' (Bialski et al., 2015, 1) of producing urban space and small scale interventions. However, they have at the same time been criticised because of their limits in addressing engrained structural and scalar *wicked problems* of contemporary urbanism and growth-oriented models of development (Brenner, 2015), 'in light of the stridently anti-planning rhetoric that pervades many tactical urban interventions and their tendency to privilege informal, incremental, and ad hoc mobilizations over larger-scale, longer-term, publicly financed reform programs' (ibid., 2015, 1).

Aligned with the above debate we argue that, the regional, situated, emancipatory logic of CAN repositions space and design away from an instrumental approach to urban upgrading, towards a process that offers a renewed capacity to speak, to have an audience and to incorporate once again a social use within the aesthetics of architecture (Forty, 2000). Adrian Forty's (2000, 311–312) seminal work suggests that 'the social qualities of architecture lay in its production': we argue that CAN supports the birth of new political subjects through such production, mobilising different architectural intelligences rather than aligning with a single activist and design gesture, and attempting to make the activist/designer somehow disappear in the process. In so doing, it avoids the construction of a narrative around the gestures of *making* and *doing* on behalf of a what could be perceived as 'common good' or 'public interest'. While surely situated in the multivariate forms of socially relevant architectural practices (Bell and Wakeford, 2008) – producing good things for the good of the society, correct and 'heal' social problem offering 'good design' – CAN avoids to linger in the architects' aesthetic dictums and taste for authorship, in what Swyngedouw (2016, 50)

defines as a ‘new cynicism that has abandoned all attempts to develop a socially responsible practice’.

Rather, CAN inherits the ethos of the radical ‘community architects’ movement of the 70s in the UK (Till, 1998; Wates and Knevitt, 1987) re-enacting and further enabling participatory practices of the ‘architecture without architects’ movements of the ‘80s and ‘90s (Hamdi, 2004; Sanoff, 2010), and adapting such origins in a peculiar cultural *milieu* of Asian youth movements, local universities, political and institutional assemblages and international support (Mcfarlane, 2011; Mitlin, 2011). Rather than *doing*, CAN enhances such productive relations and designs transformative potentials, firmly grounding the production of space and knowledge in urban poor settlements in the collective dynamics of their social life – and in so doing offering an alternative to the operational modes of several National Housing Authorities in Asia and the South Pacific.

Agamben’s relevance in the contemporary debate: *quodlibet*, potentiality, inoperativity

Agamben’s thinking is particularly useful for an understanding of architecture and design as a *destituent* (Agamben, 2014) mode of thinking and practising toward the construction of an alternative in the production of urban space and knowledge. The philosopher argues that the coming (destituent) politics does not seek a revolution, or profound changes (as radical politics do), but small changes. Agamben identifies a constituent power with an insurrectional violence, a negation, that establishes and constitutes the new law, pointing out how ‘[a] power that was only just overthrown by violence will rise again in another form, in the incessant, inevitable dialectic between constituent power and constituted power, violence which makes the law and violence that preserves it’ (Agamben, 2014, 69). Destituent power, conversely, configures as affirmative politics, centred on deactivating the governmental apparatuses of the current politics, in the interest of a coming community (Agamben, 1993) that is present but yet unrealised. The ‘new world’, hence, already exists in potential (Salzani, 2012): the concepts of *quodlibet* and *potentiality* help us to understand this statement, and to move toward a third concept, *inoperativity*, which is key in the deactivation of the overall apparatuses of powers and oppressions of the present global capitalistic system.

The first concept, *quodlibet*, emerged around the analysis of ‘whatever singularity’ as the subject of what Agamben (1993) defines as coming community. This concept was the response to the works of other authors (Blanchot, 1988; Nancy, 1991) who at the time had inspired the debate around the notion of belonging and the idea of a community immune to exclusion, isolation, discrimination, violence, abandonment, and open to ‘whatever being’ (Agamben, 1993). Agamben took a route leading to the disavowal of the very logic of belonging, identity, and representation. The literal translation of the latin *quodlibet* is ‘whatever’: Agamben (1993, 1) interprets it as ‘being such that it always matters’ instead of the traditional translation, ‘being, it does not matter which’.

Whatever being presents always a *potential* character: what makes us human, according to Agamben, is not our power of actualisation, but precisely the potential to not-be, which refers to the fact that we are capable of our own incapacity (Agamben, 1999; Boano and Leclair-Paquet, 2014; Tawa, 2011). Our capacities become, rather, faculties: Agamben (1999, 177) relocates freedom in the domain of potentiality, stating that ‘[t]o be free is [...] to be capable of one’s own impotentiality’.³ We could ask though when such potentiality, and a coming community, will materialise: for Agamben, its politics finds its place neither in the romanticism of the past nor in the yearning for a utopian future but, rather in the realisation

that the possibility/potentiality of change and transformation lies within the present. CAN's work aims to uncover the potentiality of the present and to exercise a freedom, the faculty of being negligent against the current modes of production of urban space.

Finally, *inoperativity* for Agamben must be read as a generic mode of potentiality, which is not exhausted in a transition from potentiality to action (Salzani, 2012). What is rendered inoperative is an activity directed toward a goal, a function, in order to open it to a new use, which does not abolish the old one but, rather, exposes and exhibits it. This operation, in more recent texts, takes the name of *profanation* (Agamben, 2007, 2009), implying a return of things to free or common usage after they had been separated from it. Applying the idea of profanation to the design debate and the spaces it produces would mean to return the city to the everyday users of those spaces – where new forms of life are emerging as reactions, as emancipative strategies, as Stoner's 'minor architectures' (2012:2), able to alter and dematerialise the constructed world.

The Community Architects Network as 'inoperative' practice

The Community Architects Network (CAN) is a network of practices whose operations attempt to render inoperative, to profane, those processes and projects that are the typical product of the operations of National Housing Authorities and commercial developers – designed with no real understanding of the way of life of the community residents, of their relationships with each other and also their relationship with their wider environment, from natural resources to their cultural heritage' (Archer et al. 2012, 118).

On the contrary, in CAN's practice people are put at the centre of the process, starting with the commitment of proactive community members. The basic role of community architects is to provide technical assistance and facilitation. For instance, they can help in understanding construction norms, in making reference to best practices, and in facilitating the discussion and the inevitable negotiations with local authorities. Most importantly though, they help the communities to envision possible futures: 'to transform from 'what is' into 'what it could become' (Luansang et al., 2012, 502), that open up new spaces for imagination. The 'standard government box' logic, in so doing, is replaced by imagining new possibilities for low-cost housing, common spaces, infrastructure and economic activities. The process starts precisely from listening to people's ideas (Papeleras et al., 2012), from observing and deconstructing the way in which they have built their units and their daily use of public spaces; the skills and capacities that are already present amongst community members; and the potential and shortcomings of the current income-generating activities.

The role of the architect is hence reconfigured as one of translating design inputs, showing how people's potentials are 'the key essence of the process. If a community architect can help explain the transformation process properly, to the larger society, it becomes a kind of empowerment' (Boonyabancha, 2011, 1). Physical change is conceived and practised as a vehicle for social change. This gives the physical upgrading of informal houses and sites a twofold function: it improves the material living condition of urban poor groups and, beyond that, fosters confidence in their individual and collective capacities. Such concrete, visible action manifests and materialises the idea that people-led development is possible. It shows alternative possibilities and transformative potentials to its creators and to others, encouraging those in similar situations to follow, and overall giving the inception to new modes of politics.

A great emphasis is placed on community-led mapping processes that act as a means to let those 'whatever singularities', mentioned by Agamben, emerge (Gerlach, 2015; Parker,

2006). Community mapping is the first activity through which new political subjects are created. It is the first and foremost design act that is needed in order to start any kind of upgrading project, either on-site or considering the possibility of relocation. Mapping reveals the ‘quodlibet’ at different scales. At the scale of the city, it literally puts communities on the map, and lets them emerge as urban actors where otherwise they would be invisible and neglected. Once data (numbers, land tenure situation, housing issues, income and so on) are collected, they can be shared with city authorities. These data, give informational advantage to the poor and become a bargaining tool (Archer et al., 2012) against the authorities, which often cannot access nor produce such comprehensive information. At the community level, mapping helps the poor to analyse various issues as well as to assess their natural, social, cultural and economic resources, ‘help[ing] them to identify and analyse various issues – such as the key problems that they face and how to prioritise problem solving – as well as assessing the resources they have to hand, be they natural, social, cultural or economic’ (ibid, 2012, 118). Mapping therefore becomes a powerful act of design whereby a settlement (or the entire city), emerges in its potentialities and that, in itself, starts unlocking new modes of politics. Through mapping, aspirations and negotiations between households become translated into options and site plans. This lays out the critical path for communities to upgrade or build anew.

The reality that communities are not homogeneous groups but are necessarily defined by internal diversity, means that a continuous process of argumentation is required: although mapping contributes to, precisely, ‘put on the map’ traditionally unheard subjects, the voices of community leaders and other dominant groups might still be the loudest ones. Community architects therefore must learn to play around this conflict, and to interpret it as something potentially fruitful. In a recent project⁴ in the outer district of Chbar Ampov, Phnom Penh, CAN faced the challenge of coming up with a site development plan for a small informal settlement at risk of eviction because it was entirely built on public land of a nearby school. The settlement (34 households) is arranged on a rectangular piece of land and is partially flooded, after a body of water nearby was filled up to proceed with a new development (see figure 1).

During the meetings with the community, it was inevitable to end up giving the first and last word to the leaders; these were speaking much longer than all other community members and their opinions were definitely more strongly felt. Community architects developed expedients to overcome dominant discourses and recalibrate power relations: for instance, breaking down the groups for discussions or navigating the settlements and their issues or potentials through series of transect walks, each with different members of the communities. Another set of activities were run directly at the household level, where in-depth conversations with several families were held to understand aspirations, in order to reach the level of detail at which the *quodlibet* can actually emerge. After these initial stages, architects explained their preliminary proposals to the entire community, and refined them along with them, running several exercises (see figure 2) during which, again, groups were continuously reshuffled. During the final discussion, a yellow vest was circulated around members (see figure 3), symbolising the right to talk at particular moments. Although most of the community ended up talking, the leaders were still more powerful in taking some decisions, and the solution presented eventually to the District authorities was definitely a compromise – though attentive to *whatever* design input and carefully building on the potentialities of the settlement.

This raises questions about whether this experience represented an initial step of profanation of the micro-apparatuses of power working at the community level, whether it contributed to render them inoperative. Also, we should question how the same mechanisms work at the city-wide scale, when communities act as a network. In this regard, Leonhardt (2012, p. 489),

the Regional Coordinator at ACHR, points out precisely how such networks unify, breaking the isolation of low-income and disadvantaged communities; how networks finance, providing groups with access to greater financial resources; how networks legitimise, enhancing reputation when negotiating for support from external agencies, demonstrating a level of organisation; and how networks capacitate, enhancing horizontal learning of analytical, practical and political skills. In May 2013, CAN convened its second regional workshop⁵ in Quezon City, Manila, Philippines, with the aim of working toward the city-wide upgrading of Manila's urban poor settlements. Community architects and academics from fifteen countries contributed to this collective endeavour, along with representatives from twenty poor communities of the city and about 120 Filipino students of architecture coming from all around the country. The workshop visited several settlements whose activities were considered 'success stories' of community organisation, and had already achieved a decent level of development of housing, infrastructures and economic activities. Afterwards, groups of community architects were sent to different settlements where – hosted by the communities – they worked along with them in order to come up with a series of site development plans.⁶ The settlements (whose size varied between 30 and 250 households) were exemplary of different challenges that poor communities might face in the upgrading process: amongst these were inevitable relocation, environmental threat, or the need for a re-blocking project in order to cope with the strict National Housing Authority regulations, enforced by local authorities (see figure 4).

Some communities had already gone through a thorough process of mapping with data available to commence the design process along with the community architects, while others first had to produce more knowledge about their settlement, since previous surveys were incomplete or imprecise, or the representation was not acknowledged as 'faithful' by some members of the community. Such collective action ended up in presentations to the district authorities, where a huge amount of data, maps, ideas, and drawings were put on the table in order to persuade the authorities of the immediate necessity to tackle the needs of the community, but also of a different way of doing community architecture and poor settlements upgrading (see figure 5). In a final presentation in a municipal hall in Manila, the works were presented again to personnel of the National Housing Authority and to the Mayors of the several municipalities composing the metropolitan area of Manila.

During these moments, the community architects almost disappeared, leaving the scene to the community representatives, who, empowered through gaining, finally, voice in the process of urban development, expressed their aspirations in front of those institutions that they would have once deemed unreachable. We can certainly question this process of empowerment. Building on (Mohan, 2001), CAN's processes can be read as originating *outside* a certain group, and therefore *colonising* social change. The process of mobilising communities through saving groups, for instance, might be exogenous to the culture and habits of a certain place and appear as forcibly imposed. Additionally, drawing from Cooke and Kothari (2001), empowering through mobilising consciousness undergoes the risk of co-option by ideologies: communities could effectively gain voice in front of local and national authorities, but such empowerment can underlie mechanisms of vote-buying and be used for electoral strategies. Lastly, shift of powers between different community members could be limited only to the short timeframe of a certain participatory exercise, and disappear thereafter. It is mandatory, therefore, to question whether CAN's participatory design activities risk to replicate existing power structures instead of rendering these inoperative.

By mapping, designing and networking, communities and community architects put forward innovative spatial manifestations which establish previously excluded subjects as legitimate development actors, and present their informal socio-spatial practices as legitimate in the process of urban transformation. It might be a temporary and imperfect condition but 'as

people tape together house models, push around pieces of coloured paper representing scaled house plots on a plan and make decisions about the size and allocation of plots and open spaces, they are giving physical form to that new social system' (Luansang et al., 2012, 504). The alternatives presented in Manila, in terms of process and projects, were an attempt to return the production of space and knowledge on informal settlements in the hands of their inhabitants, to make them inoperative recalibrating the structures of power intrinsic in the old system, in order to open them up to a new use.

Conclusion: a new use of architecture

The social arena is not simply a new setting where design actions unfold but it relates to multiple subjectivities, emotions and ways of engaging with the world. The wide spreading practice of 'social' architecture, together with a new attention for the environment, the public realm and the common good, certainly signals an assumption of accountability for serious issues, but it might also become a comforting manner to fold in the face of criticism of the exclusionary patterns of urban development produced by the present state of things. We endorse Andreotti's (2016, 61) reflection on 'the greatest need of architecture today [...] for ethically courageous acts that proceed from the recognition of the architect's unavoidable implication in social, political and economic processes towards which one does have a margin of autonomy to engage and if necessary to oppose'. The small change evoked by Agamben means that, in such engagement and / or opposition, architecture will remain just a little different: this new possibility is in stark contrast with the nature of architecture and design as practical, masculine, concrete, tangible, problem-solving oriented: in a nutshell, *operative*.

Reading it through Agamben's philosophy, CAN's practice stands out as not being simply another historical project of participatory design and advocacy planning. It is not limited to community mobilisation and organisation, but figures as a subtraction from the apparatuses of power that govern identities and prescribe roles and positions. Within its own limits – its institutional dimension and the risks of co-option and colonisation of social change – CAN's activities embody a necessary call for social architecture to put forward a *new use* of design related practices, facilitating a comprehensive imagination of transformations and changes through the collective will and voices of traditionally marginalised individuals. In this respect, re-discovering and liberating Agamben's thought represents an indispensable tool for architects in search of a theoretical and critical framework for a re-politicised practice and a common use of urban space.

Figures and figures captions



1. Top-view of the Boeung Chhoeuk Meanchey Tmey Pi settlement, Khan Chbar Ampov, Phnom Penh (Photo: Authors).



2. Boeung Chhoeuk Meanchey Tmey Pi settlement: discussions around a possible new layout for the settlement (Photo: Authors).



3. Boeung Chhoeuk Meanchey Tmey Pi settlement: a community member is wearing a 'yellow vest', indicating his right to speak (Photo: Authors).



4. Del Rosario settlement, Valenzuela City, Metro Manila, yearly undergoing severe floods: the community is currently seeking to upgrade its settlement through reblocking (Photo: Giorgio Talocci).



5. Valenzuela City, Philippines: a community leader explaining the current issues and future site development plans to local authorities (Photo: Authors).

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- ¹ The Baan Mankong (secure housing) programme in Thailand constitutes a large-scale precedent to CAN's practices (Boonyabancha, 2005).
- ² Since May 2011 the MSc Building and Urban Design in Development (at UCL?) has organised yearly field-trip projects partnering with the Community Architects Network and the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. The co-creation of field trips as strategic learning moments for the various actors involved have focused on community-driven upgrading of urban poor settlements in Thailand and Cambodia.
- ³ Bartleby, the scrivener protagonist of Herman Melville's novel (Melville, 2007) becomes for Agamben the paradigm of such inoperative praxis: his 'I would prefer not to' is the strongest objection against the principle of sovereignty' (Agamben, 1998, p. 48), coming to represent is not only refusal of unacceptable conditions, not only civil disobedience, but also potentiality.
- ⁴ The upgrading of the settlement of Boeung Chhoeuk Meanchey in Chbar Ampov, Phnom Penh, started in May 2015, in the framework of a workshop held in collaboration between DPU, Community Development Foundation, CAN, ACHR and the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction. Both authors attended and played an active role during the workshop along with the MSc Building and Urban Design in Development's students.
- ⁵ Attended by Giorgio Talocci as representative of the DPU.
- ⁶ The site development plan is de facto the first document to be submitted (after land tenure has got regularised) in order to start any process of upgrading.